

COMMUNITY AND MEDIA RELATIONS

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Public relations is much more than slick brochures, flashy advertising, and a well written news release. These alone cannot ensure sound relations between the library and the public. Good public relations begins with relevant products, programs, and services, and extends to the people charged with delivering them, from those who purchase the materials to those who work at a public service desk to those who make policy. The trustees, director, staff, buildings, and resources all affect the public's image of the library.

Public Relations Strategies, Techniques, Processes

Public relations comprises all of the strategies, techniques, and processes used to build the relationship between the library and the community. The field of public relations deals with a total communications process—questioning, listening, communicating, analyzing, responding, and evaluating. Many people think that public relations means publicity. Publicity is, in fact, only part of public relations. In a basic public relations textbook, *Effective Public Relations*, Scott Cutlip and Allen Center comment:

"Successful publicity, over the long pull, must be grounded in works that the public defines as good, motives that the public accepts as honest, and presentation that the public recognizes as credible."

Planned public relations efforts, then, address more than effective publicity. Such efforts must take into account the "works" of the library and "motives" communicated to the public, as well as sensitive presentation. They involve developing policy that demonstrates responsiveness, and constantly evaluating the effectiveness of all programs.

The Role of Trustees in Public Relations

Trustees play a key role in public relations as ambassadors of goodwill in the community. Their involvement helps sustain the organization's credibility in the public eye. As the official representatives of the community, trustees are vital to the public relations program of the library. Trustees have a group responsibility and an individual role in relating to the public.

Board Responsibilities

- Establish all policies with a view toward the highest stewardship of public resources.
- Work with the director and appropriate staff in ensuring maximum visibility of the library and its programs and services.
- Establish guidelines regarding interaction with news media, including the designation of official spokespeople for the library.
- Invite the community's response to high level issues, such as collection development policy, intellectual freedom issues, customer satisfaction, and director searches.
- Adequately fund public relations efforts.

Individual Board Member Responsibilities

- Be vocal and visible.
- Be well-informed, use the library, and promote the use of the library to others.
- Listen to the community.

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- Know your community (economic levels, family size, ethnic backgrounds, ages, education, occupations, schools, businesses, etc.).
 - Know the library story and be prepared to tell it.
 - Talk to trustees of other libraries.
 - Learn to be comfortable speaking to groups.
 - Attend meetings of community organizations to speak and gain information.
 - Report on the progress, plans, and policies of the library to individuals and groups.
 - Work closely with municipal and other government officials.
 - Learn about other libraries and services statewide and nationally.
 - Support the Friends of the Library group.
 - Be advocates for libraries and encourage others to do so.
 - Inform people of what trustees do, when they meet, and how they can be reached.

As already acknowledged community leaders and as citizen volunteers, library trustees are in a unique position to carry out a two-way communication with the community. By virtue of their citizen volunteer, public service role, trustees can speak out and respond to the public in ways in which the director and staff, in their public employee positions, cannot.

Some of the most effective public relations for the library is done by members of the library board, who may not know that public relations is what they are doing when they "talk library" to their friends. Everything said about the library adds to the community's awareness of an important service, and trustees need to plan to take advantage of the many opportunities they have to present the most favorable image the library.

A successful public relations program dovetailed with the library's mission, goals, and objectives, is best accomplished when the trustees and the director are working in close cooperation, with full understanding of the most effective role for each. Unless they work in tandem and write or speak with one voice about the library, adverse public relations may result. Confusion, lack of information, differences in statements, lack of preparation, and other miscommunication, which actually hurt the library's image rather than enhance it, may become publicly apparent.

Commitment

To achieve effective library public relations, everybody must be committed to work at it—enthusiastically and regularly. Each trustee has opportunities to effect positive public relations through organizations to which he or she belongs; through contacts he or she has or can easily make; and through communication skills he or she possesses. Trustees likely are already doing much of what public relations entails: talking with pride and enthusiasm with friends and other community leaders about the library and its important role in the community.

It is important to remember that each library trustee represents the library at all times, formal and informal. Varying backgrounds of board members may lead to differing opinions. It may happen that each trustee will not always agree with a board decision, but in such an event, the trustee should not act unilaterally. This is one of the most important dictums for a board member, and it is a basic premise of continued service on the board. Each library trustee publicly speaks for the board, publicly supports board positions, and always remembers that in addition to his or her one voice it is the united voice of the board that has the most powerful impact. Different voices saying different things can result in adverse public relations.

Working With the Media

Local news media play a key role in all public relations efforts. In fact, the local media can and should be one of the library's best friends. Library trustees should be aware of media resources within the community and should make it a point to know the reporters assigned to "the library beat." The media should be kept informed of meeting date schedules, agenda items, special meetings, and other special events. Library board members should also keep in mind the value of using the "Letters to the Editor" column at strategic times, and should work closely with library administration in formulating the most effective message.

Trustees should expect to be apprised of media coverage, as it occurs, and to be thoroughly briefed on all topics being covered. This is especially important in the event that they are called upon to comment or be interviewed. They should also expect the library director and appropriate staff to supply them with key talking points, especially on difficult or controversial subjects.

The Library's Image

Much of the language one hears about public relations deals with creating, maintaining, or changing the "image" of an organization. Image may be seen as a combination of what an organization does, how it deals with establishing trust, and what it says. People judge organizations in much the same way that they judge other people. People get to know other people by paying attention to how they behave, how they see themselves in relation to the rest of the world, and what they say about themselves and others. The image of the library is created daily in deeds, thought, and words by library users, library employees, volunteers, Friends, board members, and others. How can you, as a trustee, guide the creation of that image?

First of all, take a close and objective look at what is happening. What are the actions that occur in the library and about the library? In the process of judging people, we often perceive a gap between what they say about themselves and what they actually do. That perceived gap affects the way we feel about trusting that individual or having much confidence in his or her ability to perform. The same thing happens when people form judgments about institutions. If there is a gap between the image the institution projects and what it actually does, the result will be apathy, mistrust, or lack of confidence. Garnering support for the library or for special library projects would be extremely challenging in such an environment.

The Importance of Planning

Public relations should be part of any short or long-range, strategic plan on the part of the library. Board and staff roles should be clearly articulated so as to avoid duplication of effort, but the key messages and goals should be shared and agreed upon prior to implementation of the plan. Any plan should take into consideration the fact that public relations comprises all of the above mentioned components.

Conclusion

Trustees should pay close attention to what the public is saying about the library. They should also make it a point to learn how libraries in other locales handle various situations that arise. They should, whenever possible, network with trustees from other libraries at state and national library conferences and take advantage of workshops, seminars, and other training available to them. The more trustees learn, the better equipped they will be to handle difficult situations. This knowledge will also help board members feel better about the decisions they make with regard to policy and less like they are making these decisions in a vacuum. Shared knowledge, especially with regard to public relations, is a powerful tool in the hands of a highly committed group of people.

PSSST! HERE ARE A FEW TIPS FOR DEALING WITH REPORTERS

By Frank Wetzel, *The Seattle Times*, Ombudsman

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Some public figures get their names in the paper almost every day and are accustomed to dealing with reporters. Many private individuals, however, get their names in the paper only when they are born and when they die. If interviewed by a reporter, they have little idea of what to expect or how to respond.

That's a pity. It may mean they have missed a rare opportunity to express an important idea or intense feeling to a large audience.

For their part, reporters sometimes forget they are dealing with people who have had little experience with the press. Conscientious reporters will take pains to explain what they are about. But their job is to gather information, often under pressure, not protect the feelings of a news source.

Although reporters are better educated than before—88 percent have college degrees—a few are lazy, careless and cynical. Even some journalists have become wary of being interviewed. David Shaw, writing for *The Los Angeles Times*, reports that Norman Pearlstine, Managing Editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, and Louis D. Boccardi, President and General Manager of the Associated Press, now tape-record most of their interviews as a safeguard against being misquoted by reporters.

- There's nothing in the First Amendment or anything else that requires you to answer a reporter's questions, or to talk to a reporter at all; you have a perfect right to say "no comment." At the same time, you should realize that you may be spoiling the opportunity of a lifetime to tell your story. Remember, too, how refusal to comment may look in print. (Refused to comment" is worse than "declined to comment"; selection of the verb may reveal how the reporter felt about being turned down.)
- Speak slowly. That seems rudimentary, but most reporters do not know shorthand and if you chatter like a machine gun they are incapable of taking verbatim notes. A comparison in Canada several years ago showed discrepancies ranging from 45 percent to 72 percent between an official court transcript and the direct quotes printed by two news services and eight newspapers. Increasingly, reporters are using tape recorders, but transcribing an interview is time-consuming. Sometimes deadlines preclude their use.

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- Don't use jargon. Reporters are generalists. Their knowledge is often wide but shallow. They may intend to return to your arcane point later for clarification but forget. Don't assume either that they remember complicated terminology from an earlier interview.
 - Be chary of humor. A joke that's funny when spoken may look crude or insensitive in print. Try always to foresee how something will look when published. People are often surprised that a casual remark takes on unexpected importance, looks even stark, in print. Satire is difficult even for playwrights; don't try it in an interview.
 - Don't be surprised if a reporter with whom you have talked for an hour picks up only a sentence or two—or doesn't mention you at all. Your remarks may have duplicated what someone else has said or the story line may have taken an unexpected turn that makes your remarks irrelevant.

You also should be reconciled (sigh) that your comments may be out of context because of space limitations. (The better the reporter, the less often this will happen).

- Keep your answers short. A rambling answer may be more revealing than you intend. But if you have a bright quote or anecdote, use it. Reporters love them. Never, never, never, lie. An untruth brings out the pit bull in reporters.
- Conscientious reporters will introduce themselves, explain their purposes and make it clear by taking notes that they are interviewing you for a story. But don't be misled. Simply because reporters aren't scribbling doesn't mean your remarks are off the record; a few reporters with good memories don't take notes at all. Don't talk with a reporter for 20 minutes and then say, "This is all off the record, of course." Not to the reporter it isn't.
- Don't expect reporters to let you read their stories prior to publication. They see that as an attempt to tilt the story. At the same time, some reporters will exert pressure or try to put words in your mouth by how they ask a question, the lawyers' "Have you stopped beating your wife?" ploy. Sometimes it's useful in responding to a question to reframe the question itself.

This will surprise some press critics, but remember that reporters are humans too. Good ones work hard to establish rapport with their sources. You should be carefully candid, civil and, above all, honest. Faced with courtesy, the reporter is likely to respond in kind.